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ABSTRACT

As an outgrowth of their study of language theory and practice, English and elementary school teachers involved in in-service linguistic workshops are analyzing the verbal usage of a number of Toronto students to identify the language attitudes and characteristics of K-13 students and to become aware of language learning possibilities at grade levels other than their own. Audio tapes illustrating various kinds of language performance are being collected from selected students at each grade level. These tapes include individual responses made in a teacher-student interview session, informal conversation with peers, discussion with classmates on an assigned topic, and presentation of a narrative. Typescripts from the completed tapes often reveal new aspects in the student's language and perceptual development--the number of different words he uses and his attitudes and expanding interests. Findings obtained by this grass roots approach are intended to lay the groundwork for principles which might be refined later and pursued more scientifically. (CK)

DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE PROGRAM IN ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have been asked to talk briefly about a language study program we have undertaken in North York. It is not a nation-wide or federal-sponsored project. It is not a scientific research project. We hope it is a learning project. We are not starting out with several thousand samples of material collected under absolutely identical conditions with control groups also to be accounted for. Our purpose is not to prove a thesis or to establish an item of statistics. Our purpose is fourfold, three aspects of which are related to the subject of this session "What Teachers Should Know About Children's Language". Our first purpose is to learn a little about the language of students, not any specific group of students. Our second purpose is to help teachers to learn to listen and examine children's language as a basis for their work with their students. The third purpose is to examine our findings with the possibility of observing general principles which could then be refined and tested or pursued in a more scientific way. And the fourth is to interest students themselves in language as a vital human activity. We would hope at a stage in our study to decide what aspects of student language could profitably be more scientifically investigated, what procedures could best be followed, what requirements should be provided for.

In other words this is a grass roots as opposed to a scholarly study, and it recognizes itself as such. It still involves a lot of hard work; it is fun; we hope that it is profitable and it will lay the groundwork for general research.

Our modest study has begun with the collection and examination of a limited number of audio-tapes of students in our schools. It is a long range program with a fair amount of background and a limitless prospect ahead. It fits into a more general program which I feel I must explain. I think I should briefly describe the area where this program is being developed; the sponsoring group; the in-service training we promote; the general program and the materials which support the project.

Then I shall comment on a few specific details of every day concern in the program and play a couple of the tapes while you look at the typescripts.

The location of this program is called North York. It has an area of 64 square miles and is one of five boroughs constituting Metropolitan Toronto, a city of roughly one and one-half million people. North York has a school population of somewhere over 101,000 students where education is provided in 115 elementary schools, 24 junior high schools and 20 senior high schools. We have approximately 8,000 students, taking special work in English as a Second Language. The majority of these students are of Italian background, although there are, I think, 28 different nationalities represented in our Borough. The area has some reasonably well-to-do

sections and some quite low-income sections, but it has no real slums or large impoverished racial blocs.

North York has grown to its present size fairly recently -- about 5,000 students and 5 new schools being added each year for the past twelve years. We are trying to provide an education for the students in this volatile situation. Obviously our program is not going to be uniform or closely controlled, but we would like some generally-agreed-upon principles with locally tailored applications.

In order to help the system work out its English program, and to provide some co-ordination, the local Board of Education for this area has provided a central English Department -- which is called an English Department, but which thinks of itself as a Human Communications Department. It operates from kindergarten to Grade 13, one grade beyond your System, on general programs and on remedial work. There is a Language Arts Section, a reading services department with a staff of clinicians and reading-teacher-tutors, a speech arts and therapy department, a screen education consultant, a drama specialist, an English as a Second Language section. We are all dedicated to helping students develop their own potentiality, respect themselves, their fellow members of society, and the great mysteries of life. Such a statement may sound affected or unreal, but its application is a matter of direction and emphasis, not of any gigantic academic upheaval or hard sell methods.

Fortunately our local governing administration believed that it was necessary to provide in-service training for the direction our education was taking. We are currently in our third year of such in-service courses.

The courses are advertised in our school system and any interested teachers may apply. Including all aspects of our educational system -- mathematics, outdoor education, music, etc., 194 courses are provided. Our English Department has 14 different courses utilizing in all, 52 days of the school year. For each course approximately thirty-five teachers are relieved of classes, and supply teachers provided. The teachers attend the courses from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

One of the courses offered is called Language and Linguistics. The first year it was four full school weeks, a week at a time spread over the school year. The past two years the Language and Linguistics Course has been reduced to two weeks, for reasons that can be understood, if lamented. For these courses we were able to hire two professors from York University in North York; Michael Gregory and Richard Handscombe, both formerly of Leeds University in England. These men were not only linguists, but had been actively involved in the Nuffield Study of Children's Language in England, about which many of you know. For extra sessions in these courses and for an additional

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course which was run in the evenings, we have also been able to use the service and assistance of Professor Henry Gleason, well known to many of you, and referred to frequently at this conference, formerly of Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, now of the University of Toronto. As a result of these four courses about 130 teachers plus a sprinkling of consultants, principals and inspectors have at least been exposed to the attitudes and some of the theories and practices of linguistics and language study.

Two years ago, after the four-week language and linguistics courses, committees of teachers and consultants met and drafted a set of guidelines for a language activity program based on the linguistics principles studied. The preface and a few sample pages of the guidelines are in the handout. These guidelines were provided to the teachers who had attended the course and sample copies were placed in each of our schools. Interested staffs then requested both further copies and meetings with our consultants to discuss the introduction of such a program into their schools. A provincial educational system also had Professor Michael Kay make a five-part television series to demonstrate how a teacher can work with children on the discovery of the language systems. These are broadcast repeatedly.

We had then, a sprinkling of teachers who were making tapes as part of their language program and who were looking at language as a human activity.

Parallel to this interest we were trying to establish a closer liaison between the panels of our system -- between the elementary schools and junior highs and senior highs. We had found that having an administrator say "Let's have togetherness" doesn't work. We also know that working together pulls people together and that any true kind of togetherness must be based on mutual respect. So we decided that if we worked together on a study of student language across the grades of our education system we would all learn about language, we would learn a lot about students at different age levels, and we would think about tailoring programs to suit the students as we then would know them, meeting assessed needs, eliminating undesirable overlaps and building a sequential master plan. We want to know if students increase the extent of their vocabulary at a consistent rate as they get older. We want to know what features make senior students' language purportedly more sophisticated than elementary students' language. We want to know what youngsters are like, what they are interested in in the 1960's and '70's. So many textbooks have controlled vocabularies. So many books and learning materials are based on assumed interests and capabilities. We are told that children in economically deprived areas suffer language deprivation. We want to know what the nature of this deprivation is -- and if there really is a deprivation or if there is a non-school accepted language. If we find a deprivation, we hope to gear a program to that situation. If we find a high language performance in another area, then we will try to provide a program suitable for those children.

Although we have schools happily making tapes of all kinds all across the Borough, we could not, at the beginning, cope with the co-ordination of materials on a vast scale. We do not want to engage in useless work. We have gone at our work from two directions. On the one hand we found a cluster of associated schools in one small geographic area -- one senior secondary, one junior high and four elementary schools, anxious to work together. Each school agreed to select two good teachers from different grades to participate in our language investigation for that area. For our other approach we formed a liaison committee formed of two heads of English in senior high schools, two chairmen of English from junior high schools, a principal, a vice-principal, and one resource teacher from elementary schools. This latter committee represents schools across the aforementioned 64 square miles of the Borough. The latter group are working more casually at the moment. The former group are concentrating a little more energy in this direction. They are given two days a term to meet together to plan and consolidate work. They have been provided with extra tape-recorders and tapes and one week of typist-time for each school to work on typescripts. This summer six members will, we hope, be paid to process the material that will have been worked on all year, and provide a more solid base for next year.

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Now, what are we trying to do? We have had to make all sorts of decisions -- and some may have to be reversed or discarded. Each teacher is concentrating on one or two children only. He is providing some basic information about the student -- sex, age, general economic status. A sample of this information is in the handout. He is making four 5-minute tapes of each child: one with the child being interviewed by the teacher, one with the child talking freely with several peers, one with a group of students discussing an assigned topic, one with the child engaged in a narrative. We had to decide whether to have the same interviewer for all students being taped -- as in the Nuffield Research Study, or to have the teacher do the interviewing. We opted for the latter in the interests of naturalness. The narrative was included as it provides a very different kind of language performance from spontaneous discussion. We settled on a standard format for the typescript -- samples are in the handout. The standard format indicates different speakers, does not use capitals and punctuation to indicate graphic-style sentences; indicates hesitation markers and overlap and unusual emphasis. We decided to limit ourselves to four possible investigations. The one most teachers are concentrating on at the outset is lexical study -- listing the number of words used by each student over the total set of tapes. We had to decide whether to include all

parts of speech or only nouns. Research experts advised us to limit ourselves to nouns -- but on examining a few typescripts we felt that we would not get as accurate a picture of the students' performance. We are keeping track of the number of different words and the frequency of the nouns. From the list of words we hope to settle on fields of interest. What are seven-year-olds interested in? Sports? Cars? Home? What are seventeen-year-olds interested in? Drugs? Boy-girl Relationships?

We are also interested in looking at time references, geographic references and references to specific public figures to see if there is an expansion of horizon. A couple people are looking at attitudes as they show up -- attitudes to parents, to school, authority, and peers. You will see many of these items in the typescripts we have provided. We decided not to touch sentences or clauses at this stage as our people are not yet sufficiently sophisticated linguistically. We have several people who have taken leave-of-absence to do graduate work in linguistics. They may be able to help in the area of grammar at a later stage in our program.

We hope to gradually increase the number of samples, to include samples of written work with the typescripts in order to compare performance in the two modes of communication, to follow a selection of students up through several grades. But all of this takes a tremendous amount of time and energy and filing. It is a very long-range plan -- which dismays some of our participants when we meet to discuss the survey.

We are trying to train our people to use good quality recorders with mixer-stacking units and lavaliere mikes for good production. The tape by the professional taper of children's language -- Tony Schwarts -- is helpful in making teachers understand the techniques of tape-recording and we have provided simple -- over-simplified instructions. I would now like to play you two tapes, one the story of Little Red Riding Hood as recalled by a Grade I student. If you follow the typescript, I think you will notice several factors -- a surprising fluency, interesting grammatical items, and a revelation concerning the youngster, a revelation that comes from translating a fugitive form into a more permanent one Are there any comments about this tape or this youngster?

We have a tape of Grade 3, 4, and 5 youngsters discussing current events, and offering points of view on right and wrong, causes of war, tragedy, taxes. Teachers who have listened to it feel that the challenges we offer them seem very inadequate. In interests of time I did not bring it.

I would like you to look at the typescript of the Grades 7, 8 and 9 students in one school. The Grade 7 typescript was made by the students themselves -- which we consider a valuable exercise in having them understand their own language

habits. Notice their keen phonetic sense and recognition of cluster words such as "I betcha". Would you say The Wooden Horse was a good book to use with those students?

The Grade 8 discussion is an interesting revelation of attitudes to peers, parents, money, responsibility. I am wondering if an understanding of these outlooks would influence a teacher's work with the students. As a teacher of English do you "correct" the "bad action" when you know the boy?

In the Grade 9 discussion you learn a little about student thinking, language and influences in the term "karated" on Page 2. This is another aspect of their capacity for thinking about things outside of their experience, and of their attitude to tradition. Begin putting together the lexical items and you get some interesting results.

The Grade 13 tape is from quite a different school district from that of the three typescripts we have just examined. I have selected it so that some ready comparison can be made in the extent and nature of the lexical items, the general development in coping with abstractions -- and the kind of fluency. We had unconsciously anticipated a gradual lessening of hesitation markers in speech with increasing maturity, but found this to be far from actuality.

I am sorry that we do not have time to discuss samples of the analyses. But I hope that you can see that something significant can be learned by teachers and students in this process.